

Date: Wed, 10 Jan 2001 08:49:10 -0800
To: "Dr. Richard J. Roberts" <roberts@neb.com>
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>
Subject: discussion of changes in open letter
Cc: lead@publiclibraryofscience.org

Hi Rich,

I'm just about to leave for an NCI meeting in Washington. I'll try to call in transit.

A couple of important points: The only change I'd be inclined to make (if any) would be to restrict the pledge to a commitment to publish only in journals that adopt the "genbank of the literature" model,, and to make this more clearly a positive statement of the signers' determination to have their own work made available for unrestricted access and use. This preserves essentially all the "coercive" effect of the pledge, but disarms the publishers with respect to their portrayal of the letter as "bullying" or simply a "boycott". I'm getting more and more doubtful that any change in the letter would be a good idea, if it gives even a hint that we are softening our commitment to stand up for the principles advocated in the letter.

On the other hand, I think this portrayal is completely inappropriate for the present letter. How can a group of independent scientists, expressing their own views by voluntarily signing an open letter, be "bullying" the publishers that have never faced any challenge to their control over the scientific record up to now. It only seems like "bullying" to them because they are used to dictating their own terms on this issue without any challenge. I don't think we should do anything that would give an ounce of credence to this portrayal.

A second important point is that, speaking for myself, I think the PMC doesn't go far enough in the terms under which it hosts published work (that is, although its terms are fine for PMC, we - the scientific community, should demand more. To me the most important sentence in the letter is this one: *"We believe, however, that the permanent, archival record of scientific research and ideas should neither be owned nor controlled by publishers, but should belong to the public, and should be freely available through an international online public library"* (italics mine). The midwife should be paid on a fee for service basis, but should not keep the baby. I think it would be a shame if the position you have advocated so effectively in your writings on the topic were to compromise that principle. Although there are narrow and self-serving economic arguments for it, there is really no justification for publishers retaining copyright over the papers they publish, and as long as they do, the "genbank of the literature" model will not be established. I think we can craft a simple model agreement that publishers could use to replace their current copyright agreements, in which authors grant a 6 month lease, following which their work is given to the public domain.

The fact that many people would support PMC, but not sign "my" pledge (it's absolutely not MY pledge - it's a pledge made voluntarily, individual by individual, by nearly 700 responsible and respected scientists) is not sufficient reason for me to change the pledge - they can go ahead and support PMC, but not this grassroots pledge.

Best regards,

Pat